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# RELIGION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY REVISITED<sup>\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Yang telah cenderung mengakibatkan agama dan kebudayaan rentan terhadap konflik adalah persoalan identitas. Identitas budaya atau pun agama tak mesti dipahami dari sudut prinsip non-kontradiktoris atau pun dipastikan sebagai suatu substansi tetap. Juga tidak harus dipahami berdasarkan kesamaan prinsip formal, pengelompokan sosial, atau pun berbagai bentuk batas. Hal-hal ini terlampau cair, tumpang-tindih dan kontekstual untuk memahami identitas. Perbedaan cara pandang kehidupan lebih merupakan perkara "bagaimana" daripada "apa"; lebih soal bagaimana berbagai unsur yang sama digunakan dengan cara yang berbeda dan dalam berbagai konteks yang berragam. Maka, barangkali identitas lebih tepat bila dilihat dari sudut "kepedulian yang sama", yang dalam perjalanan sejarah perlu selalu dikaji ulang kembali kepentingan dan maknanya.

## Key Words:

*religion • culture • identity • principle of non-contradiction • fluid  
• contextual • relational • common concern • assessment • reassessment.*

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In spite of centuries of attack from the modern paradigm of thinking, today religion seems to be retrieving its honour and identity. Many people believe that the third millennium is characterized by the revival of religion. Yet this is not always a blessing. Indeed more often it is the contrary. Given the fact that global interdependence has also brought with it identity conflicts, religion as a basis of identity can also become a serious threat to the global dynamics of interaction, especially when it is considered the ultimate, definite and absolute category. The absolute overtone of religious identity springs from the fact that, unlike other kinds of identity, religious identity covers both extreme poles of life: the innermost private life (our deepest secret of who we are) and the outermost dimension of universe (the metaphysical God beyond and who we are in the universe). And it is precisely this absolute overtone which makes religion susceptible to totalitarianism and conflict.

What is dangerous and crucial concerning religious identity, however, is the basic concept of "identity" itself as definite distinctiveness, following the principle of non-contradiction from the classical logic: that which "is" cannot at the same time "is not", if something is white, it cannot at the same time not white (say, yellow or black). This type of logic has certainly been very useful to achieve conceptual coherence and very effective for manipulating reality (through science and technology). On the other hand, however, it is such principle of non-contradiction that has generated so many contradictions and has sharpened various kinds of differences, hence, various conflicts and separations in the human world. Besides, while such principle of non-contradiction may entertain human mind with logical coherence, reality is never that systematically coherent, it is always full of paradoxes with its elements overlapping one-another. Therefore "identity" can be viewed in different way, incorporating the overlapping parts and seeing it more as a relational process instead of a fixed and separate substance.

This paper will reexamine the interconnection between religion, culture and identity in the perspective of relationality. The basic problem with seeing identity in terms of religion and culture seems to lie in what we take as the basic constituent of identity as well as what we mean by culture in general or religious culture in particular.

## **Religious Culture**

When what is considered central in a culture is the meaning dimension of social action, it does not necessarily mean that culture is primarily located in the intellectual or spiritual achievements of a community (its

great works of art, philosophy, or literature) as is usually referred to when one talks about "high" culture. Instead, culture refers to the whole social practice of meaning-transactions which accompanies all social action, which makes it socially meaningful and not a mere biologically based reflex or personal idiosyncrasy. The meaning dimension is a matter of everyday practices, and comes up more explicitly when one is coping with difficult situations like injustice, suffering, anomaly, or dilemma. To take some cases from religious culture for example : does it make sense for religious people to kill others in defense of their religion ? are God's gracious love and forgiveness compatible with condemnation of homosexuals ? and so on.

Social meaning dimension is also a matter of meaning production. In everyday practices the meaning of formal, abstract and conceptual worldview is never really understood in detail and in definite form. One might heartily affirm the values of liberty and justice for all without understanding precisely what those values mean. Cultural dimension of social practice is often undefined that it leaves space for quite a number of possible interpretations. People might affirm the same creed without having the same interpretation of what it really means. Academic investigation and approach tend to project the object studied (in this case: religious culture) what its own procedure of investigation requires : a coherent whole. But in reality the meaning of religious beliefs or values are much more ambiguous than their systematic and neat academic formulations. The meanings become apparent with reference to other different beliefs and values, and to what the people do with the notions. The meanings are contextual in nature. And there is no automatic agreement or clarity among the believers of what something means in practice. For example, if one believes that women are equal in the economic and political spheres, does it also mean that they are equal in religion ? The answer to such question may vary.

Religious culture is no doubt constituted by some degree of general agreement. Without agreement no pattern of social practices could exist. In the social processes, however, patterns of action are not fixed but are themselves susceptible to change in the course of further actions. What is considered as "graft" or "bribery", for example, may change along with the changes of its forms in practice and its growing complexity, and thereby its meaning also changes. New practice brings with it addition, alterations, and unexpected twists to preestablished meanings. No given context can control the meaning of a particular belief or value. The context of use that establishes meaning is itself ultimately unanchored, in the sense that the

regular patterns of use that give a belief or value meaning are not themselves ruled by anything. New uses are not the simple expression of any transcendent standard of correctness; they are instead produced through a kind of experimental, inherently controversial work.

Thus, not knowing immediately what to do with new phenomenon is not a failure of competence or the outcome of improper socialization. Instead, not knowing immediately is a part of the hard process by which that competence is formed and tested in community. For example, not knowing about whether or not a woman or a non-celibate gay should be allowed to become a priest/ minister in the church, or whether we can still take spiritual direction from a minister whose behaviour we disapprove. Such concrete cases will gradually produce and form the competence.

The everyday practice is the primary locus of meaning circulation. In everyday life religion is not so much a matter of general principles as a matter of tact and good timing. We figure out, for example, when talk of God's love is better than talk of God's wrath. Religious identity therefore cannot be referred to mere formal principles. In the world of praxis there is always uncertainty about "the right thing to do". And this is so especially in the face of internal disagreement and in the shift of social constellation.

### **Identity and Social Grouping**

Identity is usually viewed in reference to social grouping and cultural boundaries. We shall see, however, that such ways of looking are not of much help to understand identity better and in a more realistic manner.

When religious community is viewed as alternative social group which is qualitatively different from others, then this is an unrealistic point of view. Most of religious believers do mostly what everyone else in society does, whether in educational, economic, familial or political functions. Religious group mostly functions more as an association than as a separate society. And they mostly incorporate many elements borrowed from others in the wider society and shape them to their own needs. Besides, social groups are generally not demarcated by a natural break in social interaction simply in virtue of the fact that they have to interact with one another. In this connection identity is but a matter of allegiance to certain standards or value orientations, a matter of self-definition, and not isolation.<sup>1</sup> Members of one group might interact on a daily basis as much with members of other groups than with their own. Seeing identity in terms of social grouping like that brings with it the bias of thinking in terms of physical objects : two

different objects cannot be made up of the same parts in the same space. But two social groups in fact can.<sup>2</sup> People waiting to buy movie tickets make up only one line, but they may constitute, and be actively participating in, any number of different social groups.

Religious identity, therefore, need not exclude overlapping activities and memberships. Like other "deterritorializing" social movements, religion has no particular place or specific geographical location it is nomadic in nature.<sup>3</sup> Besides, no social group has a monopoly on the various elements that make up its way of life; those elements cross social boundaries, being taken up in one way by a particular social group, in another way by some other. Thus the ethos of hard working, for example, might be characteristic of certain religious group, but this does not mean that hard working is a simple reflection of their religious existence. Everything depends on how the resonance and associations of hard-working are developed and made to fit with the religious preoccupations in a particular context.

### **Identity and Cultural Boundaries**

It is usually believed that texts, rituals, peculiar symbolic forms and patterns of behaviour are said to generate, like all cultures do, their own world of meaning, a web of significance that is all their own. They, therefore, are to be understood in their own terms without reference to anything outside themselves. The basic assumptions behind this are firstly, the criteria for determining the meaning and plausibility of religious practices are those internal to the practices themselves. Secondly, becoming religious is something akin to primary socialization. Learning to be religious is like learning a second language. One learns a second native language in the same way one learned the first one, by an intensive immersion in a close-knit group of people who already speak it.<sup>4</sup> And religions, like languages, can be understood only in their own terms, not by translating them into alien speech.<sup>5</sup> To know what Christians mean by "God", for example, looking at the use of the terms outside Christianity is no help. The way the term figures in the stories, beliefs, rituals, and behaviour of Christians is all that matters.

This notion of a self-contained and self originating religious identity implies that what is on the other side of the boundary is irrelevant for establishing Christian identity. The problem, however, is that if boundary is necessary, then the other side is also necessary as the constituent of the

oppositional relation. And in reality, it is not always clear whether practices that are considered the mark of the boundary of certain religion are by nature religious. For example, Greek literature and the educational practices that surround it, are they religious ? and therefore to be excluded from Christian institutions ? is the caste system merely a social practice or a part of the Hindu religion ?<sup>6</sup> The way Christian institutions are organized in the West, is it a religious matter or a consequence of following the social imperatives of the wider society ? Moreover, there are cases when social practices that are excluded at one time, are included at others.

Boundaries seem too fluid to establish the identity of certain religious practices. Since the decision to designate boundaries are often situationally determined, a practice's importance as a boundary marker does not necessarily reflect its importance for a religious way of life. Depending on the circumstances, almost anything can serve as a boundary marker. When Christians live in a predominantly Hindu society, the fact that they eat beef while their neighbors do not becomes a pertinent boundary marker.

The fact is that most cultures share a great deal; differences in cultural identity are maintained in more subtle ways.<sup>7</sup> Imported cultural forms, for instance, need not threaten a culture's identity; a difference can be maintained by interpreting those forms differently. The new social and rhetorical contexts will establish a cultural difference. Thus early Christians incorporated the shame/honour code of Greco-Roman morals. Rather than establishing religious identity by its exclusion, a cultural difference was maintained by changing the goal of such a moral code, by substituting different warrants for the practice and by making odd content substitutions.<sup>8</sup>

Identity is basically relational since opposition is essentially relational. An effective opposition depends on what stands out about one's opponent's position. Boundaries are determined by how a religious way of life is situated within a whole field of alternatives. And the boundaries can also shift with shifts in the practices of the other ways of life making up the field. The old boundary markers for Christian identity, for example, became problematic with the conversion of large numbers of Greco-Romans (martyrdom, for example, was no longer a main peculiar marker ever since).

Differences between ways of life are therefore established by differences of use. It is more a matter of *how* than of *what*. It is not so much what cultural materials we use as what we do with them that establishes identity. We use whatever language-games available. "Physis" or

"Hypostasis", for example, are common Greek words; but in the early Christian creeds their use is unusual.

One does not first determine a distinctively religious message or lens and then bring it into relation with other cultural practices for apologetic purposes. Those other cultural practices are there from the beginning as the materials out of which the religious message/lens is constructed. The apologetics with other cultures is internal to the very construction of religious sense. The transformation of the use of shared items from one religion to another is a piecemeal process. Surprisingly one finds oneself in a new culture without having had any conscious intention of leaving one's own. Actually in everyday life other cultures are never viewed with "They are all one way and we are all another" mentality. Cultures are different in certain respects and not in others, depending on the particulars, depending also on the aspects chosen for comparison. And relations with wider culture are never simply ones of either accommodation, opposition or radical revision. More often they are mixtures.

### **Identity and the Continuity of Agreement**

Identity is usually conceived of also in terms of common beliefs and values, maintained and transmitted in the form of tradition, embodied in practice by way of rules. There is also some problems with this notion. Believers of certain religion may well agree in the use of a claim to symbolize opposition to the wider culture. But this does not necessarily mean that they agree about it among themselves. The understanding of what the claim means can be different one from another.

Formal agreement may indeed create a sort of solidarity among the believers, but it does not mean that they also agree about what it implies. And solidarity can be achieved without the depth of the agreement. Agreement as the basis of solidarity is largely presumed and unexplicated. In order for religion to include all people everywhere and at all times, due to its universality, it seems that such a formal, vague and weak consensus is a prerequisite. What counts for such solidarity is the common concern. Just in so far as the symbolic forms and acts remain ambiguous are they able to unify a diverse membership.<sup>9</sup> What really unites the possible internal differences is perhaps the allegiance to matters of form (particular claims and particular forms of action).

In such context, where culture is always characterized by internal differences, the cultural continuity and the preservation of its shape are



not something automatic and natural. It is instead something constructed, and thereby presupposes certain frameworks which basically are contestable. The framework implies specific way of coping with the diversities that have emerged in the course of history. Tradition is therefore something invented, not merely found, discovered or received; it is a product of human decision in a significant sense.<sup>10</sup> The materials that are passed down and over to one time and place from some other time and place are always much more numerous than those labeled "tradition". Tradition is always a selection from the wide array of materials; always a matter of human attribution. Even ongoing customary forms of action and belief do not constitute a tradition until they are marked as such and assigned a normative status. Which materials are designated "tradition" is a matter for human judgement, which is based on a contestable claim for their centrality or importance to certain group. Thus for example, in the Christian world, whether women's ordination sustains or breaks the identity of Christian tradition depends on how the materials of tradition are arranged. The fact is that transmitted materials have to be actively articulated into strong arguments to be designated "tradition", especially when facing new possibilities and new circumstances. In this sense tradition is always highly "political", something to be fought, and sustained through struggle.

### **Identity as an open task or concern**

Communities are neither self-contained nor self-sufficient. Claims and values that are outside are brought inside, and the other way around, in processes of transformation. Religious identity is therefore established through unusual uses of materials from elsewhere. In the final analysis, what should unite a religious group is perhaps the same *concern*; the concern for true discipleship and true orientation of life. What religious groups should try to be faithful to or to protect is not some elements within or some character of religious practices themselves, which in the course of history are matters for ongoing assessment and reassessment.<sup>11</sup> What unites religious group's practices is not so much agreement about the beliefs and actions as a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out. The fact is that reflection on God's will/words in human speeches and actions cannot be restricted to scriptures, creeds, or some specific religious practices, and never simply an automatic repetition. One indeed does something with them in order to lead one's life in their light. And differences in doing that are common since the materials that those believers refer back to are



basically too vague, too many, and too loosely organized. Due to their lack of precise definition, claims and ritual actions around which the religious life revolves amount to a set of question to be answered, rather than a set of statement giving exact direction. And the unity among the believers is sustained by a continuity of fellowship, by a willingness to admonish, learn from, and be corrected by all persons similarly concerned about the true meaning of religious life. If we see identity as concern, at least there will be more openness toward the inexhaustibility of God as mystery, as well as awareness of the limit of our own human articulation.

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**End Notes:**

1. Cfr Frederick Barth's Introduction in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ( Boston : Little, Brown, 1969), 9-38
2. See David-Hillel Ruben, "Social Wholes and Parts", *Mind* 92 (1983), 219-38
3. see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* ( Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1990), 208, 392, 416
4. Cfr McIntyre's elaboration of "a second first language" in Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice ? Which Rationality?* ( Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 370-88
5. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1984) 129
6. Cfr David Mosse, "The Politics of Religious Syncretism : Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu, India", in *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism*, 85-107
7. See A.P.Cohen, *The symbolicConstruction of Community* ( London and New York : Tavistock Publications, 1985)

8. See Wayne Meeks, *The Origin of Christian Morality* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1993)
9. Cfr James Fernandez, "Symbolic Consensus in a Fang reformativ Cult", *American Anthropologist* 67, no 4 (1965), 902-29
10. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge : Cambridge University press, 1983)
11. Kathryn Tanner has elaborated very skillfully this view of "concern" as identity , see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture, New Agenda for theology* (Mineapolis : Fortress Press, 1997). This paper is very much inspired by this book.